

Abortion funding hearing a dud — senators

By Tim Richard
staff writer

Two frustrated state senators got no answers when they asked the public how to end the political stalemate on Medicaid abortion funding.

"There were a lot of intensely concerned people in this room," said Sen. R. Robert Geake, who chaired an appropriations subcommittee on social services Wednesday.

"There was a lot of fear, a lot of caution. I didn't get answers," said Geake, R-Northville.

"Our intent has failed," added Sen. Jack Welborn, R-Kalamazoo. Among other questions, Welborn asked whether people favored placing the issue of state-funded abortions on the ballot.

THREE SPOKESMEN for social agencies asked the Senate panel to pass the \$1.9 billion Medicaid budget without tying the abortion funding question to it.

But two refused to take a position on the \$6 million spending question. They were concerned about "catastrophic implications" to other services.

Although several dozen persons packed the fourth-floor committee room in the State Capitol, they declined to speak. Nor would they raise their hands when Geake sought to poll them on abortion funding.



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The social agencies annoyed Welborn when they blamed both Gov. James J. Blanchard and the Legislature for the stalemate over the Medicaid budget, which provides services for the elderly, abused children and low-income families as well as abortions for women on welfare.

"We did not veto the bill," Welborn said after the hearing. "Every group here was aware we were on a collision course (with the governor). I seriously doubt if they urged the governor not to veto the bill."

THE LEGISLATURE In June

passed a Medicaid budget with the so-called "Dillingham amendment" prohibiting state funding for about 19,000 abortions a year.

Unable to eliminate it with a line-item veto, Blanchard vetoed the en-

tire bill.

The House promptly passed a three-months Medicaid bill. It would extend the current level of funding from Oct. 1 to Dec. 31, the first quarter of the new fiscal year.

The Senate refused to pass the House extension and kicked the bill back to Geake's social services subcommittee.

Geake's panel has seven members, but only he and Welborn attended Wednesday's hearing. Geake said he might call another hearing but was unenthusiastic about it.

BEN BALDUS, representing Lutheran Social Services of Michigan, blamed "the legislative process" for "holding hostage" the Medicaid bill over the abortion question.

Questioned by Welborn, Baldus included the governor in "the legislative process." Baldus said his agency, formed by three Lutheran church groups, takes care of abused children, older adults, families in crisis, the developmen-

tally disabled and the impoverished young. He said, "Without Medicaid resources, we would be contributing to their neglect."

DONALD BENTSEN, representing the Michigan Nonprofit Homes, said, "Our only issue is, we want to continue to provide nursing home services to older citizens."

The association houses 16,000 older persons, mostly in their 70s and 80s.

"I hear what you're saying," Welborn replied. "I'm surprised your board didn't come to the governor and ask him not to veto the Medicaid bill."

"I as a legislator also have concern for the unborn who can't speak for themselves. Why point a finger at the Legislature?"

Michigan Agenda, a group representing various Protestant churches and peace groups, issued a statement saying, "Holding the '87 Medicaid budget hostage is not only unrealistic, but cruel in the extreme... hypocritical."

"Was your concern communicated to the governor?" Welborn asked spokesman Ann Fouts.

"I can't answer," she replied.

Welborn answered his own question: "I doubt if any one of them urged the governor to sign it (the Medicaid bill) if they're really concerned about the poor and the young."

THE SENATE Republican caucus, although strongly opposed to state-funded abortions, is split on how to end the string of 14 gubernatorial vetoes.

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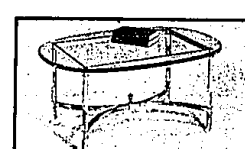
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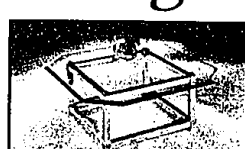
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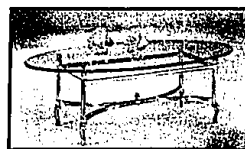
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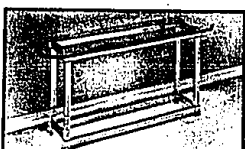
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